

## **“A Tale Of Two Snakes”**

There is a strange biblical episode in this week's portion of Chukas.

When poisonous snakes attack the Jews in the desert, G-d instructs Moshe to fashion a special healing instrument: a pole topped with the form of a snake. Moshe sculpts a snake of copper, and duly places it on top of a pole. Those who had been afflicted by the snake-bite would gaze on the serpentine image on the pole and be cured.

It is interesting to note that according to some historians, this was the forerunner of the caduceus, the snake-entwined rod which is today the emblem of the medical profession. The question is obvious: What was the point of placing a snake on top of the pole to cure the Jews who were bitten? If it was G-d who was healing them miraculously, why the need to look up at a copper-snake atop a pole?

The question is raised in the Talmud: “But is the snake capable of determining life and death?!” the Talmud asks. And the answer is this: “Rather, when Israel would gaze upward and bind their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they would be healed; and if not, they would perish.” Fixing their eyes on the snake alone would not yield any cure; it was looking upward toward G-d—it was the relationship with G-d, which brought the cure. But if so, why bother to carve out a copper snake in the first place, which can only make people feel that it is the copper-snake which is performing the miracle of healing?

In fact, this is exactly what occurred. The copper snake that Moshe made was preserved for centuries as a testament to that extraordinary event. In the passage of time, however, its meaning became distorted, and people began to say that the snake possessed powers of its own. When it reached the point of becoming an image of idolatry, the Jewish King Hezekiah (in the 6th century BCE) destroyed the copper snake fashioned by Moshe, and that was the end of that special copper snake .

Which only reinforces the question: Why ask people to look up at a man-made snake which can lead down the path to theological error of deifying the snake rather than its Creator? Another important question must be asked. The snake was the animal that caused all the harm in the first place. Healing, it would seem, would come from staying far away from serpents. Why in this case was the remedy born from gazing at the very venomous creature which caused the damage to begin with ?

The “snake” in the biblical story -- as all biblical stories capturing the timeless journeys of the human psyche -- is also a metaphor for all of the “snakes” in our lives. Have you ever been “bitten” by a “venomous snake”? Poisoned by harmful forces? Burned by life or by abusive situations? Crushed by a manipulative boss, a deceiving partner, a horrible relationship? Back-stabbed by people you trusted? Are you weary and demoralized by your life experience? Can we expect more than survival in this hostile world? What is the deeper meaning of suffering? And how do some people know how to accept affliction with love?

These are good questions which cannot be answered easily, if at all. But one perspective is presented in the portion of Chukas in the story of the serpents. G-d tells Moshe: “Make a serpent and place it on a pole. Whoever gets bitten should look at it and he will live.”

The key to healing, the Torah suggests, is not by fleeing the cause of the suffering, but by gazing at it. Don't run from the snake; look at it. But there is one qualification: you must look **up to the snake**; you must peer into the reality of the snake **above**, on top of the elevated pole, not on the serpent crawling here below....

Every experience in life can be seen from two dimensions – from a concrete, earthly perspective, or from a higher, more sublime vantage point, appreciating its true nature and meaning from G-d's perspective. There is the “snake” down here, and there is the very same “snake” up there. I can experience my challenges, struggles and difficulties in the way they are manifested down here. But I can also look at these very same struggles from a more elevated point-of-view.

The circumstances may not change, but their meaning and significance will surely change. From the “downer” perspective, these challenges, curve balls, painful confrontations and realizations can throw me into despair or drain me of my sap. From the “higher” perspective, the way G-d sees these very same realities, every challenge contains the seeds for rebirth. Within every crisis lies the possibility of a new and deeper discovery.

Many of us know this from our personal stories: Events that at the time were so painful to endure, in retrospect were those that inspired the most growth. Those painful events moved us from the surface to the depths, challenging us to become larger than we ever thought we can be, and stimulating conviction and clarity unknown to us before.

But to perceive clarity from the midst of agonizing turmoil we must train ourselves to constantly look upward. When faced with a “snake,” with a challenge, many people look to their right or to their left. Either they fight, or they cave in. But there is another path: look upwards. See the “snake” from the perspective above. And in that upward gaze you might find a new sense of healing: the questions might become the very answers, the problems may become the solutions, and the venom may become the cure. Remarkably, snakebites today are cured with anti-venom made from small quantities of snake venom that stimulate the production of anti-bodies in the blood.

It's the same idea taught by Moshe: The source of the affliction itself becomes the remedy. This is true in all areas of life. As viewed by the Creator, from the perspective above, transgression is the potential for a new self-discovery; failure is the potential for real success, holes in a marriage are the seeds of “renovation” to recreate a far deeper relationship, the end of an era is always the beginning of a new one, pain is a springboard for deeper love, and frustration is the mother of a new awareness .

This is surely the meaning in that famous, enigmatic passage in Genesis 32 in which Yaakov, far from home, wrestles with an unknown, unnamed adversary from night until the break of day. The mysterious man maims Yaakov, causing him to limp. And yet at the end of a struggling night, “a night to remember,” Yaakov says to the stranger/angel/G-d: “I will not let you go until you bless me.” “Bless me?...” Is this how you bid farewell to a man who attempts to destroy you? Yaakov was teaching us the secret of Jewish resilience. To be a Jew is to possess that unique ability to say to every crisis: “I will not let you go until you bless me.” I know that deep down your entire objective is to elevate me, to bring me to a higher place, to climb the mountain leading to the truth, allowing me to emerge stronger, wiser, more blessed. (*Rabbi YY Jacobsen*)